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OUT OF BOUNDS: 'WITNESS LITERATURE' AND THE CHALLENGE OF
CROSSING RACIALISED BOUNDARIES, 8th September 2004

Not far from here, in Kirstenbosch Gardens, you will find the remains of an almond hedge planted by Jan van Riebeeck after his arrival in the Cape on a Dutch East India Company ship in 1652. If you look very carefully you will see the date inscribed on my forehead. That comes from years of reciting, as a white South African child, that 1652 was when 'our' history began. The hedge was meant to protect the colonists. On this side they would have Europe while Africa should stay on the other. Van Riebeeck's hedge is deeply symbolic of South Africa's colonial past – a past that is deeply scarred with struggles over physical boundaries that reflect boundaries in the mind.

For generations, South Africa's children, black and white, learned racialised histories. White Europeans controlled the narratives in books and were the gatekeepers to the world of literacy and literature. For generations, if black people appeared in fiction, it was largely in one of three ways: as savage, servant, or comic buffoon. They were commonly described in terms of animal imagery, including by writers who thought they were sympathetic to their subjects. Of course this was not just in South Africa. One of the most successful series of children's books in print during my childhood (and still in print) is that of *Babar*. The illustrations in *Picnic at Babar's* (1) not only powerfully reflected social, political relations but helped to construct and reinforce in millions of young readers' minds that black Africans were more animal than human.

Babar and his family all have personal names. They wear European clothes. We can identify each of them individually and they speak our language – whether it is French, English, Spanish, Arabic and so on., depending on the translation They are indeed like human beings. So far this seems just like good fun.

But what happens when Laurent de Brunhoff takes them on an adventure into Africa? Suddenly the fun becomes less innocent. While the animals, including Zephir the monkey, are represented as individual humans, Africans, who are the real human beings, are shown as monkeys in a mixture of comic buffoon and savage. In other words, the animals have been humanised while black Africans have been brutalised. We should not dismiss the effect of such images. They can work powerfully on the subconscious. Our parents gave us books like special sweeties. But these were sweeties with poison. Once inside the head, this kind of poison takes a great deal of consciousness-raising to eradicate.

White racialised narratives held sway in the USA and UK until African-American writers, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, began to break into the bastion of children's books. Julius Lester's *To be a Slave* (2) in 1968 led the way in the USA as the first major book of 'witness literature' for young people. Lester, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D Taylor and others began to open out for readers a black world that had been despised, trashed, ignored. In the 1970s and '80s, the UK and USA children's book establishments were challenged over their previous indifference to misrepresentations of black people. The children's book world slowly began to wake up to a well of talent among black storytellers and writers.

In South Africa, however, the white Board of Censors and apartheid education departments continued to control what young people read. Only a handful of community-oriented organisations and publishers risked challenging the racist status quo and having publications banned. It required the imagination and ingenuity of a writer like T. N. Maumela to create a novel like *Mafangambiti The Story of a Bull* (3) that could slip through the censor's net. To Bantu Education Department officials this story, written first in Tshivenda, was a simple rural tale. But Maumela's story of a fighting bull was also highly symbolic of an African spirit that refused to be subdued even by the white man with his gun.

Mafanganbiti, the unconquerable bull, was worlds away from the gentrified Babar.

I was first drawn in to the world of books for young people through discovering in the early 1980s that the vast majority of so-called non-fiction books for children about South Africa in Britain totally misrepresented the country. Some were overtly racist like the most widely stocked book in schools and libraries: *Let's Visit South Africa* by Bernard Newman (4). He wrote sentences like: 'The Kung Bushmen have a tiny brain. Their language sounds more like the chatter of baboons than the talk of men.' 'Apartheid is a fascinating experiment'... and so on. Others were racist by omission. They wrote about the splendid flora and the fauna, industries and cities and so on without telling their readers about apartheid, except maybe in a final paragraph. Yet other books were subtly – perhaps even unconsciously - racist in perspective.

I was living in exile and became part of an anti-apartheid campaign to alert British librarians and teachers to the misrepresentation. To help keep the issues alive in the UK, I wrote a book called *Censoring Reality* (5) that was co-published by the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, an organisation banned in South Africa for the support it gave to political prisoners and their families. Needless to say, *Censoring Reality* was immediately censored by the South African authorities. At the same time, in the British Defence and Aid Fund's Education Committee we recognised that pushing for more accurate information books was not enough. There was a desperate need for literature that could touch readers' imaginations.

Nadine Gordimer has described 'witness literature' as 'a genre of circumstance or time and place' (6). My own experiences of literature - with writers like Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele and many others, including a host of excellent writers in the Heinemann African Writers' Series - were part of my own journey as a white South African in crossing racialised borders. Literature became part of the process that I call 'deracination'. I still recall the shock as a young adult

of reading Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (7). He took me into his childhood in Alexandra Township. It was just a few miles down the road from where I had grown up in Jo'burg. It could have been on another planet. But that is the generosity of writers. They invite you in.

However, while literature can provide an imaginative lifeline, one has to be open to it. Literature is a creative transaction between writer and reader. The writer brings her or his experiences in literature and in life into creating the text and the reader brings her or his experiences in literature and in life into reading it (8). This notion was fundamental to my doctoral research project in which a class of white British 13 year olds read literature for a year that challenged them to imagine themselves into very different situations and identities. At least three of the novels were what I would describe as 'witness literature'. They opened a doorway into 1930s' Germany, 1930s' southern states of the USA, and 1980s South Africa. Through analysing the students' responses, I wanted to see what evidence I could find of empathy, of changing perceptions and, ultimately, of any critical thinking about their own society. Would engaging in fictional witness, encourage greater awareness in relation to their own context? My findings were both illuminating and sobering and you can find them in *Through Whose Eyes? Exploring racism: reader, text and context* (9).

Fortunately, three years studying the 'filters' that readers bring to texts did not diminish my own drive to continue writing fiction. Stories are a way of making sense, first of all for myself, and then for others. If a writer can find the truths in a specific human situation, the meaning will carry across time, place. What defines 'witness literature' is that its stories and characters are umbilically connected to their wider society. But this is not documentary or journalism. The key issue in this genre of fiction is transformation of the reality in the process of writing. Each time there is an aesthetic quest to find the shape and form that illuminates the moral dilemmas, the questions at the core. It is this aesthetic, creative quest that creates space for my imagination.

When writing, I make a journey across the fence into the lives of characters at very particular points in time and place. I frequently take myself into the lives and perspectives of children I wasn't – and in the South African context the most pressing challenge has been for me to cross our racialised borders.

In my first novel *Journey to Jo'burg* (10) my characters Naledi and Tiro – two black South African children from a rural area make a dangerous journey to find their mother in the city. Their baby sister is desperately ill (malnourished like so many rural children) and they are convinced that it is only Mma who can save her. This separation of children from parents was enforced by apartheid laws. For Naledi and Tiro the journey to the city is psychological as well as physical as they discover what is happening around them. It was a psychological journey for me too. You may glimpse the particular impetus for my story in the book's dedication. Like nearly all white South African children, I had two mothers: my biological mother and a second mother, a black mother whose own children lived far away and whom she saw only when our family went away on holiday. Apartheid was rightly designated a crime against humanity and most white South African children were implicated as beneficiaries.

Even in the early '80s, despite the horrific images that had travelled around the world of black children being shot in Soweto in 1976, it was hard-going in the UK finding a publisher prepared to take on *Journey to Jo'burg*. I was told I had a 'mismatch'. My writing style, I was told, was too simple for the content. I refused to change it to a more complex style. My own children were 6 and 10 at the time and, I argued, if other children as young as that were experiencing and witnessing the horrors of apartheid, it was important to write in a way that would be accessible to as wide an age range as possible.

When a British publisher finally said 'yes', I shared royalties and made an open tribute to the support of the British Defence and Aid Fund. If it hadn't been for the persistence of its remarkable director Ethel de Keyser - a former Capetonian - I might have relegated the manuscript to a bottom drawer. The

regime's censors got hold of the first two copies that I sent into the country and the book was banned until 1991. Shortly afterwards, when I returned to the country freely after 26 years in Britain, I wanted to check whether young black South Africans felt I had represented their reality truthfully. Martha Mokgoko, Director of the SPEAK Barefoot Teacher Training Programme in Alexandra, arranged a weekend workshop. Her group included former young activists who for years had disrupted their apartheid schools to the point of collapse. I was introduced as a 'friend from England' with no mention of the book or that I was a writer. Using interactive drama techniques, Martha introduced the students to its central themes out of which they created their own story. It turned out to be remarkably similar to *Journey to Jo'burg*. At the end of the weekend, when the students were given the book to read, they approached it with critically fresh eyes. Thank goodness, it stood the test. Their chief comment was that this kind of workshop should be happening with white compatriots.

Occasionally, in Britain, I have been challenged about my credentials as a white writer writing about black experience. The first time it happened publicly, a young black South African comrade from the African National Congress jumped in before I could reply with words to the effect: "This is what we are fighting for in South Africa, not to be restricted to our own so-called 'racial group'". My own view was that it is essential to make a distinction between the creative domain and the politics of book production. It is essential to be campaigning and promoting access for more black writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, designers – for more black participation in every area of production – but this political activity should not dictate creative activity. The work must stand or fall in terms of its own artistic merit. To judge work in terms of the so-called racial classification of the author is a backward step. It confirms the racialisation of experience and imagination.

Journey to Jo'burg was published in the mid 1980s with South Africa under a State of Emergency. Once again, young people were directly involved in taking on the armed forces, despite the terror of their parents and grandparents. This

time nothing was going to quell them. I felt impelled to find out what might have happened to Naledi and Tiro. I began working on a novel that became *Chain of Fire* (11).

Originally I wanted to write it as simply as *Journey to Jo'burg* but I had got into Naledi's fifteen-year-old head and the aesthetic quest took a different form. Not allowed to enter South Africa, I undertook the work like historical research, immersing myself for months in first and second hand accounts and photographs, many of them smuggled out of the country and stored in the library of the International Defence and Aid Fund in London. That material has now come home and is archived not far from here at the Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape.

Before I could begin writing, I needed to excavate amongst hundreds of stories. I needed to inhabit these stories in order to imagine and grasp what it was to be a young person caught up in the resistance... what it was to be a mother or grandmother unable to pull your children back from the brink. In the novel, violence and violation are more direct than in *Journey to Jo'burg*. People are banished. Homes are demolished, villagers deported into so-called 'homelands'. Apart from one white member of the resistance support committee, whom we only see fleetingly, the white characters are largely ominous shadowy figures who exercise their power from a distance. In the UK, I am sometimes asked why there are so few white characters. My response is that from the perspective of Naledi and Tiro, this would have been the reality. Where I detect the racialised assumption that white people should write about other white people, I ask: Should men only write about men, women about women? Should writers in the 21st century only write about people in the 21st century? Are we only entitled to write about our own direct personal experiences? Can we really only see to the end of our own noses - or should we challenge ourselves to try to imagine life from other perspectives?

After the release of Nelson Mandela, for the first time in 26 years I was able to return to South Africa freely. I spent six weeks in 1991 travelling around the country talking especially with young people in schools and informal education projects about how they saw themselves and their futures. I came across the excitement of possibility as well as clouds of caution. I decided my next novel needed to reflect the legacy of apartheid and the obvious choice for a central character was a streetchild... a child who inherits a broken family. In 1993 I returned to South Africa with a theatre director colleague Olusola Oyeleye. Over a period of 6 weeks we offered drama and writing workshops with street children and other young people in schools and informal projects. I came away with dozens of images and voices including that of 10 year old Albert who said painfully that parents should look after their children because one day, they would be old and need someone to care for them... and 11 year old Shireen who vehemently asked 'Why do they have children if they are going to throw them away?'

6000 miles away in England, I created my own runaway street child Siphos whose name means 'Gift' yet whose mother does not seem able to protect him from an abusive stepfather. Through Siphos's story, set in the last violent months of the apartheid regime, I wanted to reflect emotional as well as physical truths of children in a traumatised, fractured society who desperately want a life. I also wanted to reflect the voices of those young white South Africans who aspired to a different future from the one their parents had previously offered them. My character Judy emerged: a white girl living in a comfortable suburban house who likes the street boy Siphos, employed for odd jobs by her father. How does one bridge friendship in such a deeply racialised society? Is it possible to reach out across such a vast rift between 'have' and 'have-not'? As in life, my characters find no easy answers.

A year later I returned to South Africa with the draft of my novel *No Turning Back* (12) to try it out with some of the young people and adults whom I had

met during the research. Once again, I was relieved that my South African readers believed in my fictional characters and situations.

No Turning Back was published the year after South Africa held its first democratic elections. It felt the right time for me to shift my focus. I was aware of an undercurrent in many letters from UK readers in which empathy with my characters led them to feeling 'lucky' to live in the safety of England. Thank goodness nothing like apartheid happens in Britain! As soon as I began to think about setting a novel in the UK, I immediately knew that my central characters had to be young refugees. In choosing to research their experience in England, I knew I would delve into themes of injustice and power, racism, family and friendship as I had in my South African novels. I began my detective trail in London with my South Africa-trained antennae on full alert.

The Other Side of Truth (13) opens with an assassination attack on the bravely outspoken journalist father of two children in Lagos. This is Nigeria, 1995, under the boots of the dictator General Abacha and the internationally-known writer Ken Saro-Wiwa has just been executed. The title page illustration for the Taiwanese edition powerfully captures the theme. Small silhouette figures run across the palm of a giant hand, carrying a large sharply-pointed pencil. The fingers of the hand appear poised to crush them, yet the drawing subtly brings to mind: '*The pen is mightier than the sword.*'

Sade and Femi's mother is killed in the assassination attack. Their father, Papa, reluctantly agrees to his children being smuggled to safety in England. Overnight, these two children - who have been brought up with the idea of the importance of speaking the truth - find they are illegal and the truth is dangerous. In addition to exploring exile, dislocation and loss through children's eyes, I also wanted to explore how it is for young people who inherit parents who challenge unjust powerful authority. I follow the unexpected personal consequences of Papa's political commitment in my sequel *Web of Lies* (17) as landmines of trauma detonate across generations.

If you read the stories told by victims to the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), you will come across some painful references to children. More often than not, however, children are not mentioned. But one might imagine them as a silent presence in the TRC report... silent witnesses and inheritors of the atrocities committed in the name of apartheid. South Africa's democratic government recognised that the health of the future society required open acknowledgement of the abuses of the past and set up the TRC. The Commission addressed itself largely to adults. But what about the children? How are they to be helped to deal with the psychological shrapnel from the past? Or with the moral corruption of the past? How do they deal with their segregated histories? Many South Africans might like to draw a blanket over what has been. Post Nazi-Germany experience suggests that the ghosts of the past rise up unless honestly faced. I believe creative engagement with literature and the arts have an important role to play in a process of acknowledgement and, hopefully, healing.

My collection *Out of Bounds* (15) forms a retrospective for me, with one story set in each decade of South Africa covering my lifetime and the era of apartheid, ending with two stories at the beginnings of 'post-apartheid'. Each story is from the perspective of a child, each with a different background. I hope the cumulative impact encourages reflection on our human condition – and a recognition that we human beings are capable of carrying out evil so casually. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu says in his Foreword: 'There is a beast in each of us and none of us can ever say we would never be guilty of such evil.' (16)

The theme of crossing racialised boundaries underlies my two final stories. In 'The Playground' set in 1995, a fence surrounds the formerly all-white school where white parents remain resistant to change.

"The word 'Dead!' struck Rosa as she drew near the cluster of children on the other side of the fence. She looked up and saw a boy pointing his forefinger at her through the criss-cross wire fence. He pulled his finger back sharply while his cheeks and lips exploded a short pistol blast. For a second she hesitated, her heart racing. She wanted to run. But that's what they were waiting for. Instead she forced herself to glance at all their faces. The narrow knife-grey eyes of Trigger-boy glinted with spite from under his corn-tassle fringe. But the others were more curious. Like cats hoping to play with a mouse.

Trigger-boy screwed up his mouth, preparing some new missile. Rosa pressed her lips tightly. She made herself walk steadily on, shifting her gaze into the playground behind the fence. Why shouldn't she look inside if she chose? But with the children's laughter now breaking behind her, she felt hot and angry. They seemed about her own age. Eleven... some even younger. And it was to their school that Mama wanted her to go after Christmas! She and Mama had read the words of the white headteacher in the newspaper. He didn't like the new law from the new government. Too bad, said Mama. He would have to obey it. When the new school year began in January, he must open the doors of his school. Mama wasn't prepared to wait a day longer for her own daughter to be admitted."

Just as Mama is quietly adamant that her daughter Rosa shall now go to the school with the best facilities, Mama's white employer, Meneer van Niekerk, is adamant that his son Hennie's school will go downhill if black children are admitted. In my play *The Playground* (that premieres in London at the end of September), I widen the story. Rosa not only has to find the courage to step into the white playground, but she also has to deal with friends from her old school in the black township who say her mother just wants to her become like 'a white'. I also take Rosa and Hennie's relationship further in the play, exploring how Rosa crossing the physical boundary is a merely the prelude to challenging more entrenched boundaries in the mind.

In my title story 'Out of Bounds', set in the year 2000, a wall separates the boy Rohan who lives in one of the comfortable houses at the top of the hill in a formerly Indian area that now has its first black African residents. As destitute squatters build their shacks up the hill closer and closer, all the neighbours are agreed about the threat. Rohan's dad builds the wall higher and tops it with curling barbed wire - the modern day equivalent, perhaps, of growing an almond hedge. He hopes to blank out vast depths of injustice and poverty. In his encounter with Solani, a child from the squatter camp, Rohan tentatively opens his imagination and is unexpectedly rewarded.

In our fractured, volatile world with its dehumanising wars and conflicts, walls reveal a poverty of imagination. We need to have the courage of both young Solani from the squatter camp and Rohan from within his security fence. As a fiction writer, I don't have solutions for the mess into which unrestrained greed, power and violence have led us. But I do know that resorting to more gated communities, higher walls, and reliance on force and arms, does not ensure safety. Without imagination – and the ability to imagine each other – we are all brutalised and lose essential attributes of our humanity. I hope my stories are a small contribution to that process of engaging imagination and making a journey across the fence. My thanks go to IBBY South Africa for inviting me to join this Congress. The act of writing is an act of hope – and I shall continue.

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